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ABSTRACT

This study explored how key shareholders (student, parents, educators, and employers) can merge Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals with employers' expectations to improve the chance of successful transitioning from student to employee. A survey was conducted of 26 parents, teachers-of-service (TOS), teachers-of-record (TOR), transition coordinators, and participating employers in a local community job program, to tap into local philosophy and priorities of job skills necessary for successful employment. Survey information was then used to investigate what employers need in entry-level employees and how IEPs can be utilized by shareholders to prepare young people with special needs to meet employers' expectations. Employers said honesty, positive attitude, and being a team member were the most important job skills, while parents believed that asking for help, attendance, honesty, positive attitude, and self-confidence were very important. Educators, however, rated attendance as the number one skill necessary for successful employment followed by punctuality. Findings from the survey also indicate parents and employers place a higher priority on basic academic skills, more so than high school educators. For job supports, all participants thought employer support to be important to entry-level employee success. Appendices include survey materials. (Contains 28 references.) (CR)

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Running head: BUILDING JOB KEEPERS

Building Job Keepers

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Abstract

Research suggests that young people with disabilities obtain employment but have difficulty retaining their jobs (Botuck & Levy, 1998; Hershey & Pavetti, 1989). One educator and one employment instructor from the same urban school corporation explored how key shareholders (students, parents, educators, and employers) can merge Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals with employers' expectations to improve the chance of successful transitioning from student to employee. We surveyed parents, educators, and employers to tap into local philosophy and priorities of job skills necessary for successful employment. These researchers then used this new information to aid in answering the following two questions. First, what do employers need in entry-level employees; and second how can IEPs be utilized by shareholders to prepare young people with special needs to meet employers' expectations?

The results suggest that collaboration between employers and educators is critical for establishing realistic IEP goals that match the individual needs of both the student and the employer.

Introduction

As businesses have been forced to compete in the expanding global markets, their need for an efficient and effective workforce is propelled perpetually higher. The “trickle down” effect is impacting almost every sector of society, including education (Natriello, 1989). The increase in standards forces accountability on educators, who are compelled to teach to the tests. “All educational tests are limited to measuring observable behaviors” (Oosterhof, 1990. p.9). However, many of the skills employers need are abstract, intangible and vary from one job to the next (Wilgosh, Mueller, Groeneweg, Evans, & Dennis, 1989). It is believed by these researchers, this constant battle can be won with increased communication and shared goals.

Entry-level employees often have poor work ethics, lack discipline, and find some jobs beneath them (Lankard, 1994; Romano, 1995). Two studies found job retention in young adults with disabilities to be only 28% over a two-year period (Botuck & Levy, 1998; Hershey & Pavetti, 1989). The repetitive cycle of losing their job and increasing negative work history, forces them to take lower paying jobs, thus increasing the likelihood of the negative cycle continuing (Habeck, 1999; Lankard, 1994). Research suggests that meaningful employment keeps young people away from a life of crime (Bauer, 1995). Parson and Bynner (1998) correlated poor math and reading skills to higher unemployment, lower home ownership, and increased probability of imprisonment (McIntosh & Vignoles, 2001. p.456).

Job turnovers cost businesses money. Nankivell (1996) found profits used in research development or new hardware must be diverted to training new employees. Researchers have studied what employers want, what job readiness programs are already in place in

schools, and what employers and educators need to do to work together to produce young adults with skills needed to not only, get hired, but remain employed (Bell & Redman, 1995; Knight-Abowitz, 2000; Bosworth, 2000).

This paper discusses documented employer needs, increasing communication between employers and educators, and increasing shareholders' involvement in transitioning young adults with special needs into successful employees.

Literature Review

Researchers have asked those in the business world to list the characteristics of a good employee. Desired job skills in one study included basic work skills, problem solving, critical thinking, decision-making, and working in teams (Sumberg, 2000). In Nankivell's (1996) study the list includes good personal skills, life-long learning skills, and positive attitudes. Employers want employees who can learn and have a background using technology (Fromartz, 2000). According to Leveson (2000) young people must be able to generalize intellectual and social skills. In another study of vocational preparations, the inventory of skills necessary for successful employment were listed in a hierarchy which included: following directions, good attendance/punctuality, good grooming/hygiene, good social skills/acceptance of constructive criticism, reliability/ responsibility/ honesty, communication skills, focus, and cooperation (Wilgosh et al., 1989; Kansas City, 2001). According to Wilgosh et al. (1989), personality, attitude, motivation, dependability, independent job behaviors, job safety, acceptance of instructions, an ability to attend to an assigned task with minimal supervision, appearance, and neat work habits are valued by employers. Employers are more likely to hire applicants with a good work history (Lankard, 1994).

Shortages of good entry-level employees are being addressed by nations, politicians, and businesses worldwide. Great Britain has an inclusive job-training program in place in schools. The training helps “young people bridge the gap between school and work” (“Helping young people bridge”, 2000). Canada has a program named Thresholds (Congers, 1997). The United States has many similar programs: Pathways, Jobs for the Future, President Clinton’s School-to-Work program and Marriott’s in-house training to name a few (Hershey & Pavetti, 1997). All these programs are designed to teach job skills, interpersonal relationship skills, and to expose young people to different career choices. Future trends in education may lead to career academics with internships to help answer the shortage of skills in the United States (Minehan, 1996). Bishop (1989) estimated that the impact of “declining intellectual achievement” cost the US \$86 billion in the Gross National Product (GNP) by 1989 (McIntosh & Vignoles, 2001, p.454).

There is poor communication between educators and employers. Education and businesses operate in completely different worlds with little interaction or understanding of each other. Education has little competition. Businesses, on the other hand, have competitors threatening their existence every day (Nankivell, 1996). Gershwin (2000) found that each has its own goals and terminology.

So how can we improve communications and outcomes between educators and employers involved? By creating business-education collaborations with an infrastructure that can establish a systematic and sustainable community-based coalition (Rowe, 1988; Glenn, 2001). Building an employer-educator partnership can be addressed the same way educators build IEPs: determine need, get key shareholders involved, build strengths of partners, establish short and long-term goals, and design a collaborative program (Romano,

1995).

Staffing is critical to coordinating and communicating within collaborations (Divena, 2000). Matching personalities and interest of employers with employment instructors (certified job coaches with degrees in special education) enables long-term relationships to evolve (Stewart, 1997). Employment instructors become the liaisons in the community linking education and business. Employment instructors work on the job sites learning the language, expectations, and personalities of all the key shareholders. They become the collaborative leaders. Collaborative leaders create alliances with divergent shareholders - creating a shared long-term vision, drawing on group knowledge in an inclusive process, building trust, and understanding over time. Their presence on site also allows them to attend to daily fluctuations in shareholders' needs. Successful collaborations tap into resources already available in their community. They also make sure public credit is given where it is due (Gershwin, 2000).

Another way to improve communications and outcomes between educators and employers is attendance and input from key shareholders at the annual IEP case conferences. Students must be invited to case conferences so they can participate in planning for their future. This also assists them in connecting today's learning to tomorrow's outcomes. Parents must participate in their children's educational experience and request work experiences at the annual case conference meetings (Unger & Luecking, 1998). They must also become partners with educators and employers in helping to create independent, responsible, young adults with positive attitudes about work. Educators must know each student's strengths and weaknesses. They must also be encouraged and enabled by administration to get into the businesses to see the demands and expectations first hand.

Then educators can find ways to integrate those ideas and concepts into their classroom curriculum. Employment instructors must be invited to case conferences to be active participants in planning realistic job skills to be acquired, transmitting evolving needs of the employers, and translating language barriers between educators and employers. Employers should be invited to attend case conferences to add diversity and a realistic perspective on job skill outcomes. If they cannot attend, they can still become committed to educating their future workers by providing learning opportunities on the job site and visiting classrooms to demonstrate employers' expectations (Divena, 2000; Knight-Abowitz, 2000). Since goals are to be met, key stockholders must nurture realistic goals (Bos & Vaughn, 1994).

IEPs can be structured to enable educators to begin to adjust their classrooms to be more reflective of employers' expectations: punctuality, teamwork on projects, higher accountability for students, increases in quality and quantity of work produced by students, encouraging initiative, more independence with responsibilities for students, and using business terminology and technology so students are familiar with them when they enter the work force. Hiring Trends (1997) lists the following examples to be investigated in the classroom: explore job fields, participate in job shadowing and internships, establish job fairs, hold mock interviews, teach resume and employment application writing and job searching techniques, researching employment trends with guest speakers, and taking field trips to local employer's job sites.

Businesses could encourage employers to go into the schools and present job opportunities to students. Employers could illustrate to students the characteristics of good employees. They could talk about how employees dress and behave differently than

students and explain why. This would get employers into the schools where they can see an environment not driven by the bottom line (Knight-Abowitz, 2000). Businesses could be encouraged, with information about available state tax credits, to participate in creating job opportunities for young people with disabilities (Dineva, 2000). Research shows that hands-on experience is the way learning occurs (Wyne & O'Conner, 1979. p.385).

Employment is not an event; it is a process (Hershey & Pavetti, 1997). It is the educators' responsibility to educate students of the characteristics employers want in entry-level employees. It is the responsibility of employers to become active partners in the development of their future employees (Dineva, 2000). It is the students and parents responsibility to be active participants in preparing for employment and life after high school.

Methods

Description of Participants

The participants in this action research study were already involved in the job-training program of our large, urban school district. Students were currently enrolled in high school or in extended young adult services. They ranged in age from 13 to 21 and qualified for the job-training program by being part of the special education program.

Karen's high school class participated in researching and exploring various job fields, such as interviewing, completing job applications, and reviewing the importance and relevance of good personal hygiene and appearances. They also took several field trips to local job-training sites.

Donna's students participated in current job training sites. They worked with mentors, co-workers, site supervisors, employment instructors and specialists on obtaining job skills

necessary for successful employment.

Educators modeled positive and negative employee skills. The students participated in teacher-led discussions of consequences for both good and bad employment skills. They worked on judging personal behaviors as positive or negative when identified by educators or site supervisors/mentors.

Participants in the survey included 12 parents, 3 teachers-of-service (TOS), 3 teachers-of-record (TOR), 6 transition coordinators (12 educators in all), and 12 participating employers in the job-training program.

Materials

In order to determine what job skills to focus on, a cover letter (see Appendix A) was sent out with a survey (see Appendix B) to participating parents, educators, and employers with IRB approval and the approval of the employer. Participants who did not initially return a survey received a follow-up telephone call. A second survey was sent to participants who requested one per the phone conversation.

Procedures

The study was conducted over two-semester period. The surveys were completed within a month of the mailings. Recipients of the survey were asked to use a Likert scale to rank those job skills discovered in the literature review to determine the priorities of participants. In order to graph the information, words were translated into numbers. Consequently, the five point Likert scale was converted from Strongly Disagree being a value of one to Strongly Agree being a value of five (see Appendices D and E).

Additional questions were asked to gain information from participants to aid in

improving student's job skills. Space was provided for additional comments.

Data gathered from the surveys were triangulated to determine priorities of the participants. This information was then used to create and implement IEP goals and objectives for each student. We also used this information to educate participants of any misconceptions they may have held. The students, parents, educators, and instructors were invited to attend the annual IEP case conferences and use the information obtained from the surveys to complete the IEPs. Parents and educators were also invited to attend the job training program "Open House".

Results

The researchers surveyed various employers, educators, and parents currently involved in the local community job program. The survey was developed based on the literature. The results, when compared to the literature, revealed similar findings.

Of the 36 surveys distributed 26 were returned, having a return rate of 72%. Only 25 were analyzed because one was lost (a teacher's).

The first question (see Appendix C and Table 1) was an open-ended question that allowed participants to write in their own priorities. The question was "What entry-level skills do you think new employees must have to succeed?"

Table 1
Question 1 open-ended entry-level skills- top three choices for each group.

1.	Following directions	Attitude	Attendance
2.	Social skills	Attendance	Safety
3.	Attendance	Follow directions	Follow directions
	Educators	Employers	Parents

Questions two (see Appendix D) and three (see Appendix E) were put on graphs

for easy visual comparisons. Two action research questions posed were. The first question, “What do employers need in entry-level employees?” was addressed with the first and third question in the survey. The second question posed: “How can IEPs be utilized by shareholders to prepare young people with special needs to meet employers’ expectations?” was addressed in the last page of our survey in questions 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 (see Appendix F)

Employers said “honesty”, “positive attitude”, and being a “team member” were the most important job skills ($M = 4.88$). The next set of job skills identified by employers was “attendance” and “commitment” ($M = 4.75$). Employers also believed that it was very important for individuals to demonstrate competency in “customer service”, “following directions”, “punctuality”, and “self-confidence” ($M = 4.63$).

To triangulate this information, parents and educators were given the same survey we gave employers. Parents believed that “asking for help”, “attendance”, “honesty”, “positive attitude”, and “self-confidence” ($M = 4.67$) were very important. They also believed the following were very important “commitment”, “following directions”, “people skills”, and “safety awareness” ($M = 4.50$). They ranked these job skills as important too: “good personal hygiene”, “nice personal appearances”, and “punctuality” ($M = 4.33$).

Educators rated “attendance” as the number one skill necessary for successful employment followed by “punctuality” ($M = 4.80$) and directions ($M = 4.60$).

In writing IEPs, educators must also address what additional job supports a student might need to be successful. Based on the literature, we discovered job supports that we asked the participants to rank according to their priorities. The second question on our

survey was “Which of the following supports do you believe are necessary to becoming a successful employee?”

Employers’ rated “employer support” as first ($M = 4.50$). “Personal management skills” ($M = 4.38$) was rated as the second support and “vocational training” ($M = 4.25$) was considered a third type of job support.

Parents considered “employer support” and “vocational training” ($M = 4.67$) as two major job supports. “Personal management skills” ($M = 4.50$) was rated as the second support and “academic education” and “family support” ($M = 4.33$) was ranked as the third job supports.

Educators ranked “employer support” as first job support ($M = 4.55$) followed by “transportation” ($M = 4.45$) and “personal management skills” ($M = 4.36$).

In our attempt to meet the needs of our students, we asked five additional questions (see Appendix F and Table 1) to broaden or change our focus with our students. All participants, that is, educators, employers, and students believed “parental involvement” was critical to a students’ success ($M = 3.0$). “Students’ role” was ranked second ($M = 2.94$) followed by “employers as guest speakers” ($M = 2.9$). Teachers’ job shadowing” was ranked fourth ($M = 2.85$). “Congruent vocational and academic” curriculum was ranked last ($M = 2.82$).

Discussion

Interpretation

We took into consideration Natriello’s 1989 research recommendations when we analyzed our surveys, i.e., we were mindful that the wording of questions may have caused employers to disregard other reasons for potential problems. In other words, to get the

information researchers are looking for; the language might trigger employers to blame schools for things they had previously attributed to other factors, such as family or social influences. Thereby, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Employers and parents seemed a little more susceptible to this in their responses to the first question than did educators.

In our first question on skills (see Table 1), parents were more mindful than the other two groups of safety awareness. We also discovered that criteria for successful employment, which we had been stressing to parents, must have been internalized because their responses reflected this. We were surprised at how often the parents and employers seemed to have closer opinions of what constitutes a good employee than educators. This we attributed to two possibilities. One, many parents worked as entry-level employees and understood what employers want. Two, many educators graduated high school, went to college, and then became educators with little to no work experiences in a profit-orientated business.

In the second question on skills, the parents and employers scored similarly. Parents and employers seem to place a higher priority on basic academic skills; more so than high school educators. A nice personal appearance is a priority to employers and parents because it is a reflection on them. In contrast, educators struggle to enforce controversial school dress codes.

For job supports (see Appendix D), all participants thought employer support to be important to entry-level employee success. The same seemed to be true of vocational training. It appears that the our job-training program is meeting its' goals and objectives. The category of personal management skills seems to have key shareholders support. Childcare appears to have more importance to educators and employers than to parents.

Childcare might not have been an issue for the majority of the parents participating in this survey. Clothing allowances seem to be a non-issue with the shareholders we surveyed. It was included in our survey since it was covered in the literature review.

On the last part of our survey (see Appendix F), we asked if educators should be given a chance to job shadow? Parents and employers both answered yes. Educators' responses ranged from "No. Teachers should be in the classroom; to "...they would need more than one or two days for job shadowing".

Opinions varied as to having guest speakers in the classroom. Parents seem to think it was a great idea. One educator expressed an interest in students going out into the community to meet and hear employers. One employer felt the time constraints would be a deterrent.

On the question of congruent academic and vocational classes one employer said, "Students might have a higher level of interest in a difficult class if they could see the application in a job area". One educator thought this might work "whenever appropriate" but should not be an emphasis.

On the question of parental involvement, one employer wrote, "This is a 'FOREVER COMMITMENT' between parent and child....". An educator said, "Parents should be realistic with a student's career goals. They should also teach their child to make appropriate choices". Another parent said, "Parents should be deeply involved in their children's education". But they also believe too much information never gets to them because teachers count on the children to tell them. Therefore parents feel "left out of the loop".

On the question of student involvement, one educator said, "Teachers and parents

should prepare them (students) to make appropriate choices”. An employer said, “In the ‘real world’ parents should be their (students’) #1 role model. If the child sees parent(s) going to work, they would realize that it (is) normalcy”. Another employers added, “they (students) seem ill prepared for today’s business”.

There was basic agreement that students should play a role in their education, one insightful parent wrote, “isn’t that the whole concept of school?”. An educator wrote, “Students need to take ownership of their vocational decisions. Planning should involve parents, counselors, family members (and) students”. An astute educator added, “.... But parents need to remember what the child wants to do is not always what they (the parents) wants them to do”.

Summary

Today schools serve more students than ever before (Nankivell, 1996). With only one-quarter of all high school graduates obtaining four-year college degrees, educators must encourage students with special needs to stay in school to gain entry-level employment skills (Unger & Luecking 1998). Education must be offering something of value to parents to encourage them to keep their children in school; thereby, enabling students to gain valuable job skills is an attractive alternative to a diploma because according to Smith (2001.), “little is known of what impact a certificate of completion will have on a student’s potential employment opportunities” (p.9.). Certificate-tracked students are given the opportunity to succeed as future employees through the local job-training program. This program enables students to experience first-hand what employers expect of entry-level employees. The collaboration between the employment specialist and the teacher of record enables the establishment of realistic IEP goals that match the

individual needs of both the student and the employer. The Open House in the community and at school with participants allows all key shareholders access to the reality of employers' expectations. Building off students' strengths enables the young adults to see their potential outside of the world of academics.

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Appendix A

Survey Cover Letter

In today's competitive market place, being efficient and effective has become a job requirement. To better meet your needs, your input in this survey is valuable. Your involvement in the INTERN Program and students with special needs is our target. Research suggests that preparation for transitioning from student to entry-level employee increases the chance for successful employment for young people. Your reply will help us write applicable transition goals to better prepare our students for the "real world" of work. By responding to this survey, you are giving consent for us to share this information with other teachers in the Action Research Master's Program, so that others may benefit from it. The surveys are color coded to identify the group you are in (parents, educators, or employers). The surveys have been randomly number to track returned surveys. All responses will remain confidential. Your cooperation and honest replies are genuinely appreciated.

Sincerely,

Appendix B

Please complete the following questionnaire.

1. What entry-level skills do you think a new employee must have to succeed?

(i.e.) attendance, calling off, following safety guidelines, etc.

2. Which of the following supports do you believe are necessary to becoming a successful employee? Place an "X" in the box that most accurately reflects your thoughts.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Transportation					
Child care					
Counseling					
Family support					
Academic education					
Employer support					
Clothing allowance					
Vocational training					
Personal management skills					
Other					

Additional Comments:

3. What priority do you place on the following job skills?

Place an "X" in the box that most accurately reflects your thoughts.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
Previous work experience					
Acclimating quickly					
Punctuality					
Team member					
Problem solving					
Commitment					
Positive attitude					
People skills					
Attendance					
Good personal hygiene					
Nice personal appearance					
Good personality					
Honesty					
Customer service skills					
Safety awareness					
Neat work habits					
Self confidence					
Follows directions					
Asking for help					
Reading comprehension					
Writing skills					
Basic math skills					
Good verbal skills					
Other					

Any additional comments:

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4. Do you believe teachers should have opportunities to job shadow, participate in job training program or business tours for one or two days each school year? Circle one.

Yes

No

Comments:

5. Should employers be invited into the classroom to be guest speakers to share their knowledge with students and educators? Circle one.

Yes

No

Comments:

6. Should core (academic) curriculum classes and vocational skills be taught congruently? Circle one.

Yes

No

Comments:

7. What involvement should parents have in preparing their children for life after school?

Comments:

8. What involvement should students have in preparing themselves for life after school?

Comments:

Any additional comments:

Appendix C

Answers to question 1:

Parents-pink

- Have good attendance, follow all guidelines and rules so there is a safe work environment and perform the duties asked of them. (03).
- Ability to follow a set of regime of work duties, good attendance, ability to interact with fellow employees and supervisors(05).
- Attendance, following safety guidelines are important. Knowing the proper procedure for calling in sick is paramount plus knowing what is an acceptable excuse. Understanding the employer is counting on you and providing to them that they can is the foundation for all good employer-employee relationships (06).
- I think an employee must be able to show up for work on a regular basis and follow all safety guidelines. They must exhibit a strong work ethic; be able to obey work rules and call off when sick. They must also be willing to learn and train to do a good job and develop new skills. (07)
- Be on time, only call off when you need to, come in early if needed, keep work station clean, clean clothes, good hygiene (09).
- Keeping busy (10).

Employers- green

- Communication skills (listening, written and oral). Following safety guidelines, good attendance, ability to follow directions/ ask for assistance. (01)
- Positive attitude, willingness to learn new tasks as well as the above mentioned. (Attendance calling off, following safety guidelines etc were examples given with the questions)(02)
- Good attendance, prior training, positive attitude (03)

- Positive “can do” attitude, basic skills in reading, writing and math, the ability to follow directions and ask questions for clarification. Strong work ethic. (05)
- Work ethic, positive attitude, self-motivation (08)
- Positive attitude, team player (09)
- Commitment to succeed, a passion for the job they are applying for, competent, great attendance (10)
- Attendance, attitude, customer service, calling in, flexibility, willingness to learn, team player (12)

Educators

(Transition coordinators-beige)

- Follow initial directions, appearance, punctuality, cooperation, desire to do well, accept criticism (01)
- drug free, good attendance, ability to work with others (02).
- Attendance regularly, being on time, staying on the job (not on break), working steadily (03).
- Good hygiene, appropriate dress, adequate social skills, good attendance, ability to ask for assistance, ability to follow direction, remain @ work station, remain on task (04).
- Good attendance, ability to follow direction and ask questions, good personal appearance, enthusiasm for job (05).
- Good attendance, safety guidelines (when applicable), calling in when absent/ sick, etc, self-motivation/ direction and using time wisely (06).

(Teacher of Record-yellow)

Follow directions from supervisors, appropriate peer and adult interaction, able to read information and safety signs, good attendance, positive attitude, and ability to self-direct and take initiative.

-Consistent attendance, being on time, doing what is expected once you get there and follow directions (05)

-lost (06)

(Teacher of Service- blue)

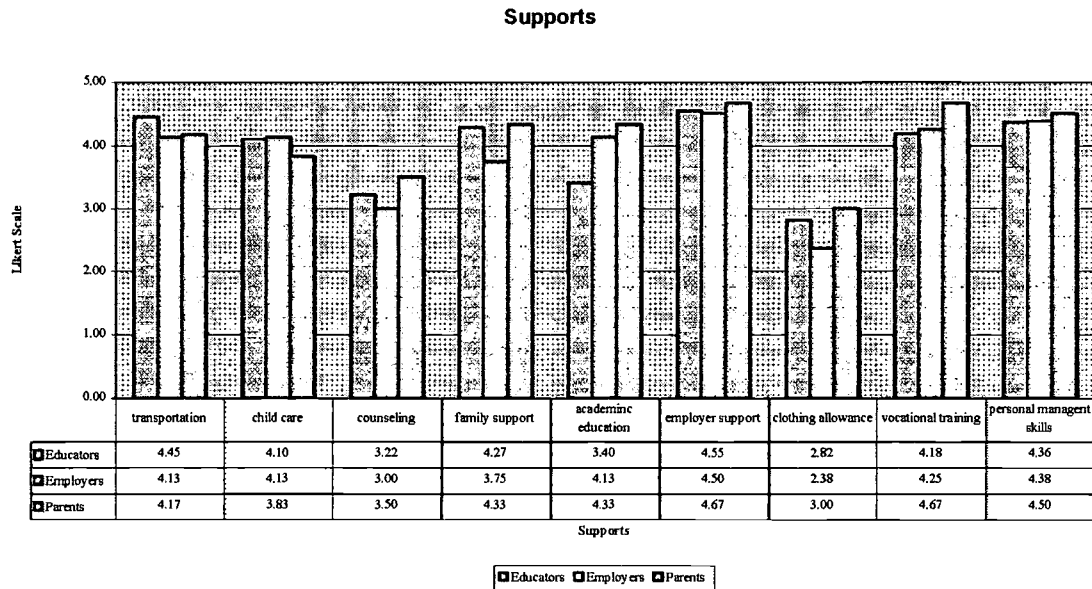
- New employees definitely need self-discipline, this assure their bosses that they can be independent. They also need good people skills! This is very important. (01)

- Good attendance, an ability to see when tasks need attention, ability to get along with others (03)

- Reliability, ambition, acceptance of constructive criticism, organizational skills, pride in work (04)

Appendix D

Survey Question 2: results. All numbers represent averages.

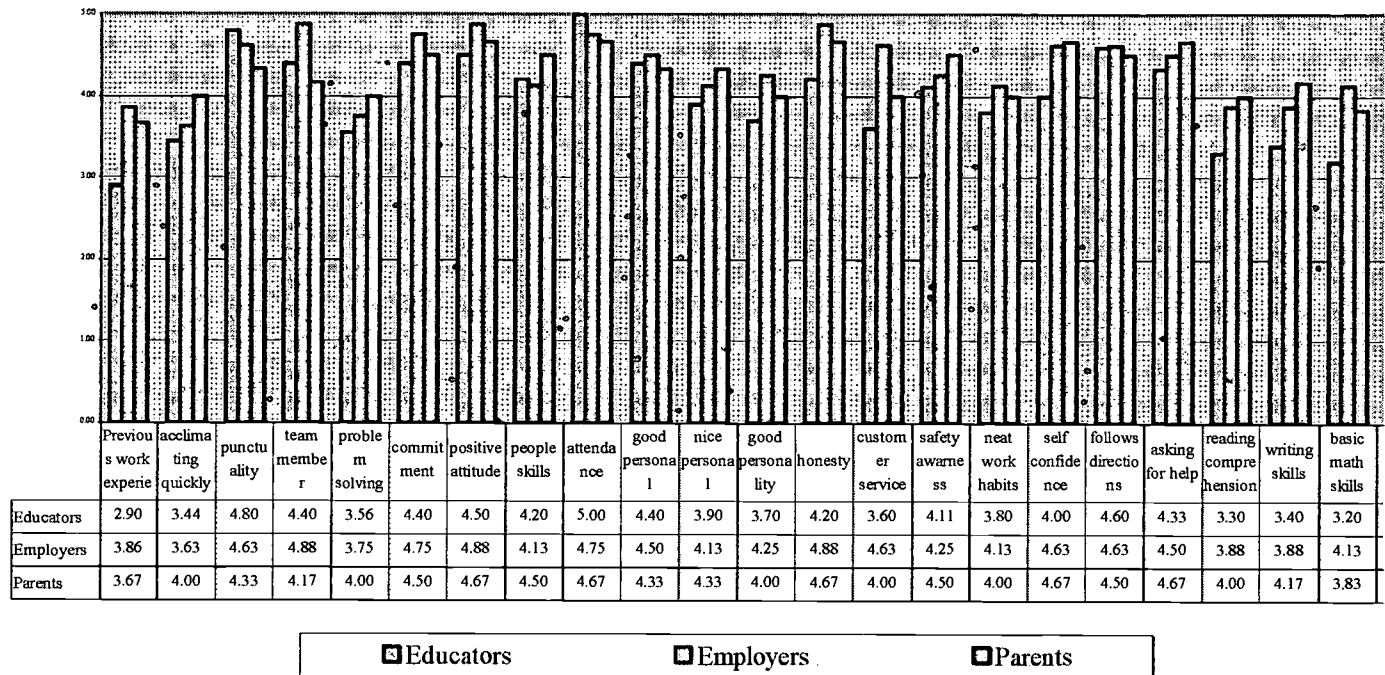


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Appendix E

Survey Question 3: results.

Entry-Level Work Skills

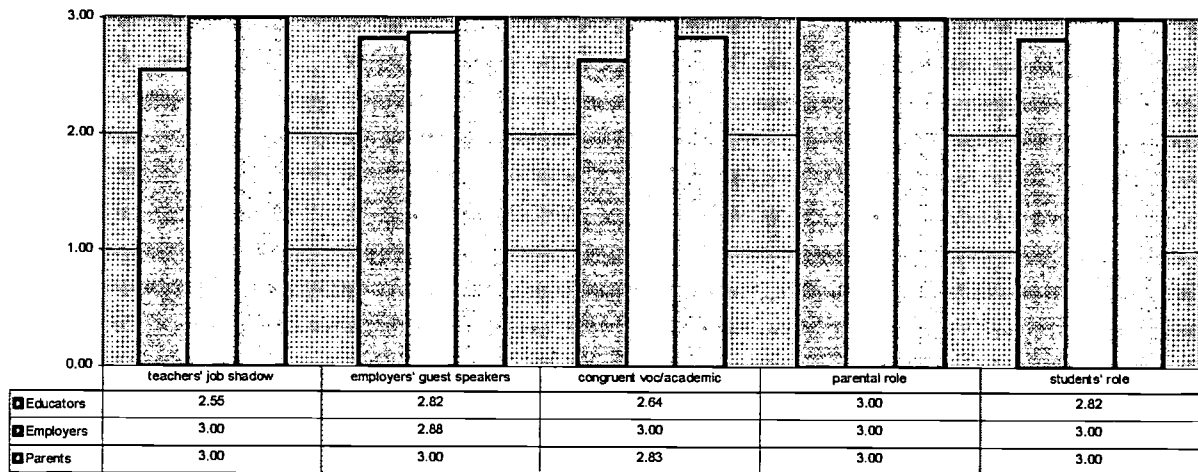


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Appendix F

Survey Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, & 8: results.

Additional Information



■ Educators □ Employers □ Parents

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